WILLIAM HASKER

IN DEFENSE OF THE TRINITARIAN PROCESSIONS

Ever since there has been a doctrine of the Trinity, that doctrine has included the generation of the Son from the Father. This notion preceded the official formulation of the doctrine in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and in fact played an essential role in the overall development of the doctrine of the Trinity. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, the processions—the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit—came to be rejected by a number of Protestant theologians and philosophers. Ryan Mullins (this issue, 33–57) has made the case for this rejection more carefully and more plausibly than most others, and it is a pleasure to be able to engage with him on the topic. As he has pointed out, he and I are in agreement on a number of other theological questions, which helps to keep our disagreement on this issue from being confused by conflicts on other points.

Like many others, I am impressed by the theological wisdom of the "Wesleyan quadrilateral" of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. On the present subject, to be sure, experience does not have a role to play: no human has experience of the trinitarian processions. But tradition, scripture, and reason serve nicely to delineate the topics of my disagreement with Mullins. I address briefly tradition and scripture, before devoting my main efforts to reason, in the form of a logical analysis of concepts related to the doctrine of processions.

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TRADITION

The centrality of the generation of the Son in trinitarian tradition is not in dispute. Indeed, it would be difficult to construct a coherent narrative of the development of the Christian doctrine of God in the first few centuries without giving an important role to this notion.[1] To be sure, critics of the doctrine of processions will tend to view this as an unfortunate feature of that history. Mullins notes the emphasis laid on the Son's generation by Origen, and comments, "I think it is incredibly telling that Origen's appeals to ineffable mystery did nothing to stem the coming tide of subordinationist theology in subsequent generations" (43). Larry Hurtado, in contrast, throws quite a different light on the state of Christian thinking in the second century, referring to Justin Martyr:

> What Justin did face in his own time was, on the one hand, Jewish accusations that Christians worshiped two gods, and on the other hand, the internal threat of Christian teachings (Marcion, Valentinus, and other demiurgical traditions) that posited a sharp distinction between the creator deity and the God from whom the Son had come forth. Hence, characteristic of proto-orthodox Christianity, he emphasizes one creator of all, and one source and center of all divinity, including the Son/Logos. Justin clearly sought to deny that the Son/Logos was a creature, or an emanation from God like the sun's rays, or represented a partition in God such that the being of the Father was diminished. Yet he also wanted to account for the Son/Logos as a monotheist, and the only way he could do so was by attributing the source of the Son/Logos to the Father.… In the first two centuries, all texts from, and affirmed in, the developing proto-orthodox tradition, from the New Testament writings onward, reflect subordination Christology, the Son understood as the unique agent of the Father, serving the will of the Father, and leading the redeemed to the Father.… If, in the light of Arius, fourth-century Christians became jittery with anything that smacked of subordinationism, that is irrelevant for understanding Christian thought of the first two centuries.[2]

What Hurtado says here implies that Mullins is anachronistic in his complaint about Origen: he neglects the actual situation of second-century Christian thinkers in order to enforce requirements that can only reasonably

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[1] For an overall account of the tradition of eternal generation, see Kevin GILES, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

[2] Larry W. HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ, Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 647–48.

be applied to a later period. In fact, the fourth-century debate with Arianism was heavily focused on the origin of the Son. For the Arians, the Son was a created being, albeit highly exalted, and therefore could not be God. For the pro-Nicenes, it was precisely the eternal generation of the Son that guaranteed his divinity. This emphasis on the generation of the Son reaches a stunning climax in the Nicene Creed. The Creed states once that the Son was born of a virgin; once that he was crucified; once that he rose from the dead; once that he ascended into heaven—and *five times* that he is eternally generated from the Father![3] Apparently Athanasius and the assembled fathers at Nicaea wanted to hammer home this crucial doctrine, which contradicts the non-divine status ascribed to Jesus by Arius and his followers.

SCRIPTURE

Opponents of the doctrine of eternal generation do not usually focus heavily on tradition. Instead, they tend to be Protestants who complain that the doctrine is not taught in Scripture. It is true, of course, that we do not find in the Bible clear, explicit affirmations of this doctrine, any more than we find clear, explicit affirmations of the doctrine of the Trinity as a whole. What we should be looking for are statements about the *derivation* of the Son from the Father, as well as the *dependence* of the Son on the Father. Furthermore, we need statements where the derivation/dependence in question is not traceable to the Son's appearance in his earthly life. A pertinent example is Hebrews 1:2, which speaks of "a Son … through whom also he created the worlds." The Sonship referenced here is not plausibly supposed to have commenced only with the Son's earthly life! Another example is John 17, where Jesus, self-identified as the Son, refers to "the glory that I had in your presence before the world was made." The Father–Son relationship is the fundamental background presupposition of the entire passage; it would make no sense to suppose that this relationship was not in effect in the time before creation.

Alongside the Father–Son texts, there are other passages that strongly imply a relation of ontological dependence between the beings in question. Consider John 1:1: "In the beginning was the *logos.*" The notion of Word, or

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[3] Christ was "eternally begotten from the Father," "God from God," "light from light," "true God from true God," "begotten, not made."

Reason (however *logos* is best understood) clearly implies dependence. "Word" and "Reason" are not free-standing entities; a *logos* is the Word or Reason *of someone*: in this case, of *God*, which is to say, the Father. The text from Hebrews cited above continues by saying that the Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (NIV); both "radiance" and "representation" imply a relation of dependence. In Colossians 1:15 Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." Each of these texts deserves, and requires, careful exegetical work in order to bring out carefully the nuances of what is being said about Jesus. All of them, however, express a relation of dependence which can be given a formulation in the doctrine of processions.

The one biblical text which comes closest to providing explicit warrant for the doctrine of processions is John 5:26, "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." Note first of all that *to have life in oneself* can only possibly be a divine attribute. This cannot be just a synonym for "being alive," so that a bird or an oak tree also has life in itself. This is a distinctive attribute of the Father, but one which, amazingly, the Father has also conferred upon the Son. Next we ask, is this an *accidental,* or an *essential* divine attribute? A very little thought reveals that it can only be an essential attribute—one such that a being that possesses the attribute *cannot exist without it.* But if this is so, what are the circumstances under which the Father can have granted this attribute to the Son? The Son cannot first have existed without the attribute, and then later have come to possess it. If the Son has life in himself, he must always have had it, since he always, eternally, existed. (See John 8:58: "before Abraham was, I am.") We are forced to conclude that *the Father can only have granted to the Son to have life in himself in the act whereby the Father conferred on the Son his very existence.* And this, of course, is precisely what is said by the doctrine of eternal generation.

REASON

Most of Mullins' discussion consists of logical analysis of the doctrine of processions, with the aim of showing that this doctrine comes into conflict with other claims to which trinitarians are committed. I will first set out Mullins' objections, followed by my response to the objections. Then I will address a difficulty that arises for Mullins' own perspective on the Trinity.

Mullins' argument against the doctrine of processions is actually quite simple. It centers around the attribute of *aseity*, which he contends is a great-making attribute and thus an essential attribute of God. Aseity is defined as follows:

> A being exists *a se* if and only if its existence is in no way asymmetrically dependent upon, nor derived from, anything external. (44)

In support of his claim that aseity is an essential divine attribute, he argues as follows:

> It is difficult to understand how God could be the foundation of reality if God's existence is derived from, and dependent upon, something external. Imagine that I offer you a cosmological argument for the existence of God, and I tell you that this divine person is the ultimate foundation of reality. Say that you ask me for more details about this divine person, and I state that this person's existence is causally dependent upon or derived from some external thing. Surely you would doubt that this person is the foundation of reality since this being's existence is dependent upon and derived from something more fundamental. From this, I take it that if a so-called divine person lacked aseity, that person would not in fact be divine. Whatever the actual foundation of reality is, that being is God. Anything less is an inferior being. (53–54)

I acknowledge that aseity as defined is a great-making attribute, and as such an essential attribute of God. However, I question the inclusion of "asymmetrically" in the definition of aseity, which implies that dependence relations that are symmetrical would not compromise aseity. First of all, notice that dependence is not inherently an asymmetrical relation, as is asserted by Mullins. There are numerous contexts in which symmetrical dependence relations are exemplified. Team members in a competitive sport, such as soccer or basketball, are symmetrically dependent on each other in their play: the excellence of a single player's performance is very much dependent on the excellence displayed by others around her. Soldiers may be symmetrically dependent on the activities of their comrades for their mutual survival. In a given case, one must look at the circumstances to see whether symmetrical dependence relations are possible. And in the context of the Trinity, I believe symmetrical dependence should count against aseity. A being which is *a se* should be one which does *not at all* depend for its existence on anything other than itself; if the being on which it depends is itself dependent on

the original being, that fact does not cancel out the dependence of the first on the second.

That having been said, I acknowledged that the definition given by Mullins works for the purposes of his argument. Later on, however, we will encounter a context in which the point made becomes important.

Now, given that the Son is God—that is, is divine—and that aseity is an essential divine attribute, it follows that the Son has the attribute of aseity. But from the fact (as seen in the doctrine of processions) that the Son has a cause for his existence, it follows that the Son does not have the property of aseity. This, then, is a very straightforward contradiction; the Son both does, and does not, exist *a se*. And if in the light of this conflict we stick with the processions, and thus with the view that the Son does not have aseity, it follows that the Son lacks a great-making property the Father has, and so the Son is not homoousios with the Father and is not (fully) divine. So much the worse, according to Mullins, for the doctrine of processions.

Now we turn to my proposal for avoiding this contradiction. Mullins labels the section of his paper that addresses my view, "Fiddling with Aseity," and the title is apropos, insofar as I am indeed suggesting that an exclusive focus on aseity has led us astray. He states that, for me,

> the true underlying notion of aseity is independence, and he [Hasker] identifies three possible meanings of independence:
>
> > (I) A being Θ is *logically independent* of other beings, if it is not logically necessary that, if Θ exists, some other being does as well.
> >
> > (II) A being Θ is *causally independent of other beings*, if there is no causal law or principle which requires that, if Θ exists, other beings also exist.
> >
> > (III) A being Θ is *independent of causal input* from other beings if there is no require-ment that, in order for Θ to exist, some other being must provide causal input for Θ.
>
> Hasker's position is that (I), (II), and (III) are requirements for the Trinity as a whole, but none of them is a requirement for each divine person. In this way, the strategy is to say that the Trinity as a whole is *a se* or independent in some sort of way that avoids ontological subordination. (52; emphasis in the original)

Filling this out a bit more, my solution points out that none of the persons satisfies (I), because it is necessary that all three persons exist together. Nor does any of the persons satisfy (II), because if the Father exists, he necessarily causes the Son and the Spirit to exist, and if the Son and spirit exist, it

is necessary that they are caused by the Father to exist. The Father, and the Father alone, satisfies (III), because there is not any necessary causal input for the Father's existence. (Thus, (III) is equivalent to aseity, as defined by Mullins.) The Trinity, however, is independent in all three senses, as Mullins points out. It seems to me that these results are exactly what one ought to expect, given the doctrine of processions.

Mullins, however, is not satisfied. He states,

> I find it difficult to understand Hasker's position.… I don't quite understand how the Trinity as a whole can have (I), (II), and (III) and yet the Father lacks (II), and the Son and Spirit lack (III). This strikes me as counterintuitive. If (I), (II), and (III) applies to the whole Trinity, one would think that these would be aspects of the shared divine essence or part of the minimal homoousios. (53)

Mullins' puzzlement here is understandable. I believe, however, that he has fallen victim to a mistaken assumption, albeit one that is common to many other authors. The mistaken assumption is that there is a *single* thing, describable as "*the* divine essence." But to see why this is a mistake, a brief explanation of the notion of essence is required.

In general, the essence of a given entity is the conjunction of properties that together constitute the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for that thing to exist. There are, however, two different sorts of essences. There are *kind-essences*, which give the necessary and sufficient conditions for an item *to be a member of a given kind*. There are also *individual-essences*, which give the necessary and sufficient conditions for an individual *to be the particular individual that it is*. I believe the notion that there are these two varieties of essences is widely accepted, though there will be disagreements about what sorts of properties are required in the case of both kind-essences and individual-essences.

For some reason, however, the insights implicit in that explanation have often not been applied in the case of the Trinity. I believe there are several questions we need to consider:

1. What is the kind-essence for the kind, *trinitarian person?*

2. What are the individual-essences for each of *the Father, the Son*, and *the Holy Spirit?*

3. What is the individual-essence for *God*—that is, for *the Trinity as a whole?*

These answers to these questions will not coincide. Note, however, that the individual essences for the persons will *include* the kind-essence for

trinitarian persons: no person could exist without satisfying the requirements for being a trinitarian person. (These would include the standard divine attributes, such as eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, and the like.) But the individual-essence of each person will also include the "proper attribute" which makes it *that person* and not any other person.

Now, the traditional view is that the distinguishing attributes of the persons are precisely those derived from the "relations of origin" between the persons. The Father, and the Father alone, is "ingenerate"; the Son alone is "begotten," and the Spirit alone is "spirated." But it is precisely the Trinity as a whole that is *independent* in *all three* of the senses delineated above. I find it to be telling that Mullins, seeking to underscore the importance of aseity as a divine attribute, cited the case of a cosmological argument from contingency. Such arguments are not usually thought of as ways of establishing the existence of the Father, considered as a trinitarian person. Rather, they are arguments for the existence of *God:* that is, in the context of trinitarian doctrine, for *the Trinity as a whole.* I believe, furthermore, that in the context of an argument from contingency it would be widely perceived as a shortfall of the argument if it presented God as a being who did not satisfy (I) and (II) as well as (III)—that is, as "merely" *a se* but not as "independent" in the full sense I have specified. That the existence of God logically implies the existence of non-divine beings (that is, if (I) were not true in the case of God), would mean, in effect, that God is *necessitated to create*, and this view, while perhaps not heretical, has generally been rejected by mainstream theology.

In my book on the Trinity, I pointed out that, for the Cappadocians, unbegottenness (= aseity) is a personal property of the Father, and not a property included in the divine essence (that is, it is part of the Father's individual essence, not of the kind-essence of the trinitarian persons). Mullins, as we might expect, was not impressed: "This was a poor response when the Cappadocians offered it, and it is a poor response now".[4] Well, if I have been taken in by a bad idea, at least I am foolish in good company! And on the other hand Mullins, and those who agree with him, have the "benefit" of the support of the Arian Eunomius, who insisted that only the Father is "true God" because only the Father is unbegotten. But I would ask Mullins, and also the reader, to consider, in the light of our discussion here, whether the

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[4] R. T. MULLINS, "Hasker on the Divine Processions of the Trinitarian Persons," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 1 (2017): 11.

Cappadocians' view might not have more merit than is allowed by his dismissive reply.

Another view of the early fathers that is relevant here is that it is precisely *because* the Son is generated from the Father that Father and Son are homoousios—thus reversing Mullins' contention that the doctrine of processions implies the negation of homoousios. To be sure, there is some evidence from the ancient world that seems to support Mullins' assessment of this situation. In his paper he cites Philip Cary as stating

> In a nutshell, the pro-Nicene theologians used the Platonist concept of eternal generation while denying the consequence any pagan Platonist would affirm: that everything generated is ontologically inferior to what generates it. It is a case of a conceptual resource too rich to be swallowed whole.[5]

No doubt Cary is right about the "pagan Platonists," and for a few Christian theologians the "overly rich" conceptual resource found in the Platonist doctrine of emanations may have led to theological indigestion. In the upshot, however, the impulse towards subordination implicit in the Platonic doctrine was carefully strained out as the processions of the Son and the Spirit became entrenched in the Christian doctrine of God. Mullins doubts the coherence of this move. He writes, "Origen claims that the generation of the Son guarantees that the Father and the Son are equal. How does generation guarantee this? Origen does not explain how eternal generation guarantees this. Instead, he punts to ineffable mystery, and this becomes the standard move throughout Church history" (43). But I believe Mullins is being less perceptive than we might have expected when he asserts that this appeal to mystery was the only resource left to the fathers at this point. Christopher Beeley summarizes the situation as follows:

> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, sharing the exact same divine nature, only because the Father conveys that nature to the Son and the Spirit, while the consubstantiality of the Son and the Spirit with the Father is the corollary and the eternal result of the monarchy of the Father.[6]

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[5] Philip S. CARY, "Divine Causality According to Neoplatonism," in *Philosophical Essays on Divine Causation*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (New York: Routledge, 2022).

[6] Christopher A. BEELEY, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 210.

However things may be with Platonic emanations, the processions of the divine persons work in this respect like the relations of generation we observe in the everyday world around us: *beings that come to be through natural generation are of the same kind as the beings from which they are generated.* When dogs give birth, they give birth to other dogs; cats to other cats; human beings to other human beings. And the beings thus generated are not inferior ontologically to the beings that generate them. If this were not the case, the entire living creation would be subject to a rapid and universal decline. In the same way the Father, who is God, generates the Son and the Holy Spirit, each of whom is also fully God.

At this point I wish to explore a difficulty which seems to arise for Mullins' view of the Trinity. Mullins and other "no-processions" theorists are of course committed to the unity of God. But how is this unity to be secured? For the church fathers, the divine unity is guaranteed by the "monarchy"—that is, the sourcehood[7]—of the Father. If this is lacking, what takes its place? The question turns out to be surprisingly difficult to answer. In what, then, does the oneness of God consist? Mullins' answer features a series of requirements set out by Keith Yandell:

> (T1) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P exist and either of the other Trinitarian persons not exist.
> (T2) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P will what is not willed by the other Trinitarian persons.
> (T3) For any Trinitarian person P, it is logically impossible that P engage in any activity in which the other Trinitarian persons in no way engage.
> (T4) The persons of the Trinity have complete non-inferential awareness of one another.[8]

Without doubt, (T1–T4) point to an impressive degree of unity between the three trinitarian persons. (T1) expresses the *necessary coexistence* of the three persons; (T2) expresses the *unity of purpose* of the three persons; (T3) gives the *unity of operations* between the persons; and (T4) expresses the *perichoretic interpenetration* of the persons. So we are to think of the kind-essence of the trinitarian persons as guaranteeing these results. Even given all this, however, we may still ask, 'Is this enough?' I have pointed out that

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[7] The term "monarchy" in English is misleading. *Monarchia* in Greek is derived from *arche*, source; it does not refer to rulership.

[8] As quoted in Ryan T. MULLINS, "The Trinitarian Processions," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 71, no. 2 (2023): 33–57 (this issue).

T1–T4 are consistent with the view that each person is an *independently existing source of being and activity.* If each of the persons is a necessary being, a view accepted by Yandell and presumably also by Mullins, T1 follows immediately. But this fact fails to establish any metaphysically significant relationship between the persons; any three necessarily existing entities—say, the number 87, the entailment relation, and the null set—are "necessarily coexisting." And, given the perfection of the persons in knowledge and goodness, T2, T3, and T4 all fall out without much additional effort. But it does not seem acceptable that we have three "ultimate sources of being" in the Trinity; this comes far too close to tritheism.

Mullins is familiar with this argument and seems to accept it; he states, "mere logical relations do not capture the internality or so-called 'essential dependence' of the persons on one another. Mere logical relations would be consistent with three independent and necessary beings." In order to avoid this, he states that "it is of the essence of the divine persons to be strongly internally related to one another such that they cannot exist apart from each other." Well and good, but what exactly must be included in the essence of the divine persons so that they are "strongly internally related"? It is already true, in virtue of T1, that it is logically impossible for any divine person to exist without the other two. Adding more "merely logical relations" presumably won't help. But let us suppose that there is some feature of the trinitarian-person essence in virtue of which the persons are strongly internally related.

We may call this simply "the Feature" and need not speculate further as to exactly what it may be. We then ask, could the Holy Spirit exist, if the Feature were not part of the Father's essence? Clearly, the answer is No; this much is guaranteed by T1. But in this case we must ask, does the Holy Spirit exist *a se*, as according to Mullins it must? How can it do so, when the Spirit's existence is made possible by this Feature in the Father's essence? Perhaps this might seem possible, in that such a contribution would be symmetrical rather than asymmetrical, and thus would not be excluded by Mullins' original definition of aseity. (It is also true that the Father can exist only because of the Feature which is part of the Spirit's essence.) But I think this move is a cheat; a being whose existence is supported by a symmetrical relationship is not self-sufficient any more than if the relationship were asymmetrical. (That's why I objected to "asymmetrical" when the definition was first introduced.) In fact, it seems extremely mysterious how there can

be such a Feature included in the kind-essence of the persons, while still maintaining that each person exists *a se.*

Perhaps, however, at this stage in the discussion this question is best left unresolved. It is possible that a satisfactory answer is available, or then again maybe not. It needs to be emphasized that none of the arguments earlier in this section is dependent on this point. In particular, my defense against Mullins' argument for the incompatibility of aseity and the *homoousion* does not depend on the fate of this difficulty for the no-processions view. In any case, this discussion may help to dispel the idea that that view exists in a secure space, from which it can criticize the doctrine of processions without facing difficulties of its own.

CONCLUSION

I have provided a brief overview of the place of the doctrine of processions in Christian tradition. I have then offered a sketch of some biblical materials that provide warrant for the doctrine, not by stating the doctrine in explicit detail but in showing the dependence and derivation of the Son from the Father. Finally, I have given a logical analysis of key concepts involved in the doctrine of processions, showing that the doctrine is not only coherent but can meet the objections raised against it. I maintain that, on the basis of Scripture, reason, and tradition the doctrine is superior to any alternatives and deserves to be maintained.

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IN DEFENSE OF THE TRINITARIAN PROCESSIONS

Summary

The doctrine of the processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father, long an integral part of the trinitarian tradition, has recently been challenged by a number of philosophers and theologians, as is shown in the preceding article by Ryan Mullins. In this reply I speak briefly of the place of the doctrine in tradition. I then review biblical evidence supporting the doctrine, and provide a logical analysis which shows that the doctrine is coherent and has the resources to meet the challenges that have been raised against it.

Keywords: Trinity; processions; eternal generation; eternal spiration; homoousios; perichoresis.

W OBRONIE TRYNITARNEGO POCHODZENIA

Streszczenie

Doktryna pochodzenia Syna i Ducha Świętego od Ojca, od dawna stanowiąca istotny składnik tradycji trynitarnej, została ostatnio zakwestionowana przez niektórych filozofów i teologów, czego przykładem jest zamieszczony w tym numerze artykuł Ryana Mullinsa. W odpowiedzi omawiam pokrótce miejsce, jakie zajmuje w ramach tradycji doktryna pochodzenia. Następnie przytaczam dane biblijne na rzecz tej doktryny, a także przedstawiam analizę logiczną, która pokazuje, że doktryna ta jest wewnętrznie spójna i może uniknąć stawianych jej zarzutów.

Słowa kluczowe: Trójca Święta; pochodzenie trynitarne; wieczne zrodzenie; wieczne tchnienie; współistotność; perychoreza.